

Media, PA - Autism is a disease that strikes 1 in every 150 American children, and is more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. A new case is diagnosed every 20 minutes, making it the fastest-growing serious developmental disease in the United States. If this escalating trend continues, the prevalence of autism could reach some 4 million Americans within the next decade. — Congressman Joe Sestak entered politics specifically due to his concerns about healthcare for our nation's children, and has taken a special interest in autism. He regularly visits facilities for autistic children throughout his District, including the Milagre School, the Child Guidance Resource Center and Carelink. He was successful in placing an amendment into the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act that enhances funding and research for autism for military families by increasing it by 100 percent. This will necessarily benefit children throughout the United States who are affected by autism.

“Providing increased funding for autism therapies for military families will have far reaching effects for non-military families who are currently fighting for autism insurance reform in many states across the country,” said Congressman Sestak.

The Congressman's legislation will serve as a template for states who are currently seeking to institute autism insurance reform. For example three states—South Carolina, Texas and Indiana—have already passed autism insurance legislation that specifically requires private insurance companies to provide coverage of Applied Behavioral Analysis and other structured behavioral treatments. Furthermore, Autism Speaks, the nation's largest autism advocacy organization, announced recently that it will undertake a multi-state initiative to pass insurance coverage provisions for autism services. Expanding on Autism Speaks' ongoing advocacy work in Pennsylvania, the 2008 initiative will extend to Florida, California and Michigan, battleground states in the effort to compel commercial insurers to cover evidence-based, medically necessary therapies and services for individuals with autism.

Currently, Health and Human Services and Department of Defense numbers estimate that \$186.4 million are spent on autism research, and the Congressman's amendments will enhance these efforts, positively affecting children throughout our nation.

Specifically, the Congressman's amendment addresses the difficulty faced by thousands of armed forces personnel and their families who are unable to obtain appropriate care for autistic children through the military's Extended Care Health Option (ECHO). With passage of this legislation, autistic children of servicemen and women will receive a minimum of \$5,000 per month of autistic services, which is double the current limit of \$2,500 per month.

Approximately 8,500 children from these families have autism; however, a recent estimate by the Congressional Budget Office shows only 700 autistic children are enrolled in ECHO because of long waits and limited coverage. ECHO's limit on autistic care allows only five hours of therapy per week, while studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Research Council show that these youth need from 25-40 hours per week.

Congressman Sestak has now doubled effort for coverage for autistic children, but he strongly believes that more needs to be done.

That is why he also introduced—and the House Armed Services Committee adopted—legislation that will require a study on the feasibility of transferring autistic coverage from the limited ECHO program to the more expansive TRICARE. As a basic entitlement under TRICARE, autistic children will finally receive the 40 weekly hours of recommended autistic therapy.

“We cannot allow our children with autism to be shortchanged. With access to the right, medically-necessary, evidence-based therapies, like Applied Behavioral Analysis, these children can make incredible gains, reach their potential, and become contributing members of our society,” said the Congressman.

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.*